

# Reimagining Spain

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## Valorization Addendum

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‘When we ask what the value of humanities research is we go consciously or unconsciously to the humanities themselves, to subjects like philosophy, history and the arts. But this role of the humanities as a crucible wherein we test and judge values is part of their value, or perhaps more accurately, ‘meta’-value (in the sense of the value of value)’ (Bate 2011, 290).

The book *The Work of Memory: New Directions in the Study of German Society and Culture* (2002) by historians Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche, starts with the following words:

‘The current interest in memory, among both scholars and laypersons, has become almost an obsession. A term that ten years ago had little public resonance has entered household vocabularies and everyday speech, buttressing the claims of individuals, victims and social groups for various forms of recognition, compensation, and entitlement’ (Confino and Fritzsche 2002, 1).

I feel that this tremendous interest in memory has in no way decreased. As such, the now more established academic field of “memory studies” has found support in the world outside academia as well. Memory studies are closely related to current social and political debates, as they focus on the way the past is perceived, represented and performed in the present. These memory practices and discourses are, for instance, closely related to identity formation, which is a topic on the forefront of current political agendas, especially when we think of political debates and topics like the expansion of the European Union or (im)migration policies. With that, research outcomes in the field of memory studies offer new insights and practical tools to activists, policy makers, teachers and the cultural sector.

Within the field of memory studies, this dissertation focuses on the memory debates in contemporary Spain, and, it specifically looks into how and why these debates are connected to other instances of remembrance around the world. With that, the out-

comes of this dissertation will contribute specifically to the Spanish debate on how to deal with the legacies of the Spanish Civil War, a debate that has cultural, juridical and political aspects. The insights gained from this study, however, can also be applied to other national geographies, as well as on a transnational scale, as it specifically looks at why and how memory discourses are entangled across the world.

### *Public debate*

First of all, this dissertation offers new insights, which can be used in the public debate on the role of transnationalization and globalization in the formation and reconfiguration of national identities. Especially the insights into how European memory discourses and Human Rights discourses influence a local context such as that of Spain, can help to understand the impact of such discourses on the production of new (national) identities. As such, this study claims a close relation between transnational memory discourses and attempts at redefining contemporary national identities in Spain. Analyzing these topics from the perspective of cultural and literary studies offers fertile ground for debates on the dynamic relationship between memory culture and democracy as well as for thinking constructively about identity, memory and sense of belonging, which seem ever more relevant and urgent today. Artistic expressions are a laboratory for the construction of identity, and the works that I have analyzed throughout the dissertation offer insight into how discourses of transnational entanglement lie at the basis of the construction of a new inclusive Spanish identity; an identity that seems to have increasing political effect through newly founded political parties such as *Podemos*, *Ahora Madrid* or *Barcelona en Comú*, which all have a very active agenda when it comes to memory politics.

The findings of this study are also important to European policies on the production and cultivation of common identities and shared values. Within this perspective, this study's theoretical approach, which allows for understanding more complex forms of agency as well as the intrinsic entanglements of different memory discourses, may add to ways of dealing with "conflicts" of memory or instances of "competitive" victimhood that are played out on national and transnational scales. In Spain, political debates on the recognition of civil war victims too often fail when they an impasse is reached, in which the victims of the two warring factions are compared to each other as well as to contemporary victims of terrorism. In Europe, victims of Stalinist violence are set against the victims of the Holocaust. This dissertation, on the basis of its findings, concludes with an ethical proposal for a politics of memory that actively engage with the

unavoidable exclusions produced in the articulation of memories, as a way of overcoming these kind of competitive oppositions.

This dissertation also feeds into the debates on exhumation practices in Spain, which remain a highly unsettling subject that deeply divides the Spanish public opinion. As such, my analysis of the cultural impact of these exhumations will be of use to activists and policy makers alike. My findings can be highly relevant, as they show how the exhumation work effects a much broader cultural field than just the victims' relatives and the activists directly involved. Beyond direct memory activism, these cultural narratives offer different proposals on how to overcome recurring contradictions in the public debate on Spain's dictatorial past.

Moreover, the exhumations in Spain are directly related to a worldwide trend that is geared towards the material exploration of the past, in which digging up the victims of past crimes is at the center of the reinterpretation of the nature of these crimes and of the recognition of their victims. The recent exhumation attempts in former German concentration camps are a striking example of the renewed interest in the material traces of human rights violations. Within this perspective, my findings will be useful with regards to accommodating and understanding these renewed interests in material traces and use these insights to explore alternative ways of disseminating knowledge about the past. In particular, my findings have fed into the research project *The Underground Past: Exhumations and Memory Politics in Contemporary Spain in Transnational and Comparative Perspective* (PI: Francisco Ferrándiz), which investigates the social and cultural impact of mass grave exhumations in a comparative perspective and is closely linked to the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), which focuses on exhuming mass graves of the civil war. The impact of this project as a whole on Spanish and international media outlets and public debates can be seen in the newspaper articles which appear almost every week, inviting the different researchers to translate and voice their findings to the general public.<sup>219</sup>

The topic is also of interest to the Dutch media, as shown by the occasions I have been invited as an expert, to help out Dutch media outlets which wanted to inform Dutch audiences about the problems that Spain is facing in coming to terms with their dictatorial past (Groen 2008; Rietman 2014). Also, at the moment I am collaborating with the Amsterdam City Archives on a project that seeks to highlight some of the archival documents that relate to the Dutch volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, in order to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and to

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<sup>219</sup> See the English and Spanish news section at [www.politicasdelamemoria.org](http://www.politicasdelamemoria.org) (last visited March 17, 2016).

underline its relevancy in relation to contemporary issues of civil conflicts and international participation.

### *Engaging with academia's exclusions*

Throughout my PhD I have worked with different collectives on the production of narratives, publications and exhibitions that translate the critical findings of memory studies to broader audiences. More particular, together with the Spanish association *Memorias en Red* I have worked in an interdisciplinary and international team that translates research findings into formats suitable for audiences outside academia. A constant challenge in all of these projects is the effective translation of the critical and process-oriented approach specific to memory studies – as well as the field's engagement with alterity – into an “attractive” and “readable” product. This challenge has led us to invent formats that are aimed at encouraging a continuous debate about the past. To that end we have created open-ended and multifaceted narratives, which focus on raising questions instead of giving answers, thereby, we hope, contributing to the dissolution of strong identity boundaries instead of to their construction. I think that, as a scholar, it is important to be actively involved in these kinds of projects, so that, as researchers, we can experiment with, and test, the implications of our scholarly concepts on practical applications.

In one of these projects, *Memoriadero*<sup>220</sup> (January 2014 – March 2015), which was commissioned as a project on the cultural memory of the Madrid municipal abattoir, now a center for contemporary art, we translated these underlying premises into an exhibition, a colloquium including artistic performances and an online research blog, all concerned with questions and unknowns rather than with answers. At the same time, the project addressed the limited public access to knowledge in institutions such as archives and academia, while mapping sources for further inquiry.

A second project, *MemorÁgora*<sup>221</sup> (March 2015 – ongoing), seeks to create alternative spaces of debate, where academic and non-academic audiences can interact about topics related to memory politics in Spain. On the one hand, this project is aimed at breaking the boundaries between academia and society at large. On the other hand, it is conceived as an alternative means for disseminating academic knowledge relating to ongoing political debates, much faster than the current publication practices in academic circles. One of our outputs has been an online forum, in the form of a “blog,” in which we invite the interested public to debate important topics, in this case the future

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<sup>220</sup> See <http://memoriasenred.es/memoriadero/> (last visited March 17, 2016).

<sup>221</sup> See <http://memoriasenred.es/memoragora/> (last visited March 17, 2016).

of the remaining vestiges of Francoism, and to react to the proposals of expert scholars we invited.

A third project of interest, which is still in the making, is the collaboration of *Memo-ri-ias en Red* with the newly created *Born. Center for Contemporary Memory in Barcelona*; a public center that aims to translate academic insights into exhibitions, public lectures and other cultural events, while at the same time consciously distancing itself from the debatable and Manichaean memory discourses promoting a Catalan nationalist narrative which the “museum” has exhibited until today. The center also hopes to bring academic research and other audiences together, and to discuss issues of memory that go beyond the matters of national identities.

### *From translation to access*

I would like to end this valorization addendum with a critical reflection on the relation between academia and the public sphere in general. Apart from the production of specific output intended for non-academic audiences, an important goal of the valorization of academic research, in my opinion, should be producing qualitative academic publications in formats that are accessible to readers outside academia, allowing for a more fluent interaction between academic, “para” academic and non-academic debates and audiences. The current situation, in which much of the publicly paid academic research disappears behind the pay walls of publishing houses, contributes to a further distancing between academic and non-academic discourses. With that, an active engagement with the proposals for open access is of importance to the public valorization of any scholarly endeavor. An example of this kind of ethics of open access is the monthly research seminar *Faces and traces of violence*, which I have co-organized at the Spanish National Research Council from 2011 onwards. The seminars feature internationally renowned scholars in the field of memory studies, and we have actively sought to invite fellow scholars, students and memory activists alike, which has resulted in interesting and productive debates combining different types of knowledge. Based on these seminars, we have published a large part of the papers that were presented in an open access digital journal called *Culture & History* (Hristova et al. 2014).<sup>222</sup> Thus, instead of “translating” research outcomes for a non-academic audience, public valorization can also be located in actively giving non-academic audiences the opportunity to engage with academic discourses. Just like in the case of transnational memory discourses, it is always a two-way street.

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<sup>222</sup> See <http://cultureandhistory.revistas.csic.es/index.php/cultureandhistory/issue/view/6> (last visited March 17, 2016).